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ON PAGE A-1

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No proof on POWs, recruits say of Gritz

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Former Green Beret James G. "Bo" Gritz once asked former servicemen to risk their lives on a private POW rescue mission into Laos when he had no hard evidence that Americans were being held there, four former associates claim.

And, they say, the bizarre mission had almost no chance of success.

Gritz has been in the news since early this year when he came back to the United States from Southeast Asia and aroused enormous controversy when he said American POWs were still being held in Laos. Two weeks ago he admitted to a congressional committee that despite several forays into Laos, he still has no concrete evidence U.S. servicemen are being held there.

Regarding the latest statement from his former associates, Gritz — citing unhappiness with other articles The Washington Times has published about him — said in a brief interview that he will not address the issue.

The new allegations come from four former military men associated briefly with Gritz in 1981. They are former soldiers James P. Monaghan and Tom Smith, former Air Force officer Mark Berent and former Marine pilot Richard Hebert.

In several hours of interviews, the men detailed how they went to a location near Orlando, Fla., in February and March of 1981 because they were convinced that Gritz had both government backing and hard

evidence that Americans were being held in Laos.

There they learned that Gritz could not give them the necessary intelligence to justify a POW rescue mission 40 to 50 miles into Laos, they said.

Smith, who left a profitable solar-home business in California to join Gritz, said he looked into the operation to work as an advance planner. It was to involve up to 20 men.

In a matter of days, Smith said, "it became obvious that he (Gritz) never had any hard data, and you can't plan a mission that way. He could have sent 20 people into Laos and possibly got them hurt."

Gritz refused on several occasions to furnish proof that the POWs were in Laos, Smith said, making his planning of the mission impossible.

At one point, Smith said, Gritz came up with a plan that "had us going into a location in Laos, stealing a truck, driving many miles inland, going into the POW camp with guns blazing, rescuing the men and then driving back to Cambodia (where the mission was to originate)."

Smith recalled that Gritz gave pep talks to the men about the mission.

In one, he said, Gritz "was telling us that we would shoot our way into the POW camp, and as he put it, 'take all of them (the Laotians) out, and leave nothing but a bunch of bodies behind us.' It was wild."

On another occasion, Smith said, Gritz briefly considered taking a powerful laser weapon along to chop through the Laotian jungle.

The idea was dropped, he said, when it was realized "that the power unit to make it work would be so big it would take a two-and-a-half ton truck to haul it."

Smith said he was first drawn into the mission by broad hints dropped by Gritz that the CIA or other intelligence agencies were backing it. But he said he soon concluded that wasn't so and went back to California.

In a recent letter to Gritz, Smith said, "You did not have government sanction, nor did you ever have a target.... As a person who was called upon to make sacrifices in what now seems to be fabricated illusions, I want to know why I was called to Florida. I want to know what evidence existed to justify your actions."

Berent, the former Air Force pilot who flew missions in Vietnam before he retired as a lieutenant colonel, was called in to plan a strategy for any air rescue attempt Gritz might arrange.

That possibility fell through, Berent said, adding, "Gritz's evidence that indicated the POWs may have been in Laos was at least 12 years old. He couldn't provide anything more current like reports from agents or current maps.... It is correct that he had no hard evidence."

Berent, like Smith, left Gritz's Florida camp soon after concluding the mission had no basis.

Monaghan, another former soldier, said he left for Gritz's encampment at the site of a cheerleaders school in Florida, convinced Gritz was "really onto something. I thought Gritz had a hard target."

He added, "After I was there for a while, the whole thing looked very phony. Gritz kept promising to give us hard evidence, but he never did. You don't base a mission on guesswork."

After determining the mission had no chance, Monaghan left for his home in Los Angeles.

Hebert, the former Marine flyer, said he also went to Gritz's encampment with an open mind, but he said, "After two days it was apparent to me that they had no target and the thing was a farce. I left."

Meanwhile, as these men fell away, Gritz was attracting attention to the mission in the local papers because he had let interviewers into the camp

along with a mystic and a hypnotherapist.

The mission called "Velvet Hammer," disbanded, Gritz told a House subcommittee last month, at the request of the government.

The former associates remember it differently. "It was the publicity," Monaghan said.

In his testimony before the House panel, Gritz painted a different picture, not mentioning that some recruits were disenchanted. "I and the men of Velvet Hammer were ready to launch within a fortnight (of mid-March of that year)," he said.

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Last week, quoting government documents and eyewitnesses, The Washington Times reported that Gritz had fabricated his role in a 1966 Vietnam battle.

Gritz had claimed he was present when a Green Beret committed suicide so his fellow soldiers could escape and live.

However, Gritz later admitted that the story was a "composite," and he was not there.